



**Testimony**  
**SB 6283 – Eliminating the Death Penalty**  
**Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**January 25, 2012**

Senator Kline and members of the Committee, my name is Father Michael Ryan. I have been a priest for 45 years and pastor of St. James Cathedral in downtown Seattle since 1988. I am grateful to you for this opportunity to speak. I am here this afternoon on behalf of the Washington State Catholic Conference, which represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State on issues of public policy. The Catholic Conference respectfully urges you to support the passage of SB 6283, abolishing the death penalty in Washington State.

The Catholic Bishops of this state have long been on record as opposing capital punishment. At the same time, they have also been very clear in expressing their deep concern for the families and friends of victims of violent crimes, and in their commitment to helping them to heal. They also have spoken of the right of all citizens to be protected from perpetrators of violent crimes.

Murder and other violent crimes cry out for an appropriate punishment, but the death penalty merely adds violence to violence and perpetuates the illusion that the taking of one human life for another can somehow balance the scales of justice. In addressing the appropriate level of punishment they acknowledge that in the most extreme cases, life imprisonment without the possibility of parole is an appropriate sentence.

The bishops, along with many others, have raised a number of questions about the death penalty: Is our motive for applying the penalty public safety or is it revenge pure and simple? Has the death penalty proven to be a deterrent? Is it possible for innocent people to be executed? Is the death penalty fairly applied across all social, economic, and racial groups? These and other questions are being raised here and across the country as state legislatures reconsider the death penalty. And with good reason. And I would add that there are simply too many examples of people denied their constitutional guarantee of full access to the legal system. To quote Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, “People who are well represented at trial do not get the death penalty.”

As the pastor of an inner city parish for the last 24 years, I’ve seen the horrible and tragic impact of violent crime – including murder – on victims and their families. The devastation of murder is incalculable. Civil society must protect its citizens; and violent offenders must be fittingly punished.

But I believe deeply – and many of the people who come to see me in times of great pain – some of whom have experienced the murder of a loved one – have arrived at the same conclusion - the tragedy of such loss is rarely – if ever - diminished by state sanctioned homicide. In fact, the protracted legal process only prolongs and deepens their pain.

Then, too, there is simply economic reality that you know far better than I do. Capital punishment costs the tax payers far more than incarcerating convicted murderers for life.

But there is a greater cost: in the words of Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking* and a highly respected voice against capital punishment: “The death penalty costs too much. Allowing our government to kill citizens compromises the deepest moral values upon which this country was conceived: the inviolable dignity of each human person.”

I thank you for having the courage to look at SB 6283 on its merits, and, in the name of the Catholic Bishops of Washington State, I urge you to support its passage.

Thank you for your consideration.